

At Fort Hood, every day is Memorial Day

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FORT HOOD -- At precisely 1700 hours every day, this place stops moving.

The only sound that can be heard across the sprawling military installation is a low rumble lingering from cannon fire and the bugle call To the Colors.

Soldiers, wherever they are, snap to and salute, holding until the bugle falls silent.

It's a time-honored tradition in the military -- it is referred to as rendering honors during afternoon retreat -- but Fort Hood had gotten away from it in recent years as the post got so big and everyone got so busy with the war.

One man brought it back, for that very reason. The war.

Every day, he decided, must be Memorial Day on this post.

"If we don't do this here, where are we going to do it?" said Maj. Gen. Jeffrey Hammond, commander of the 4th Infantry Division.

It's not difficult to find soldiers for whom afternoon retreat holds real meaning. More than 3,400 troops have died in Iraq, more than 360 of them from this base.

The 1st Cavalry Division has lost 17 soldiers in the last three weeks. The 4th Infantry Division last week added the names of 235 troops to its war memorial.

Sgt. Aaron Riley, a 22-year-old from River Oaks, is an infantryman, 11Bravo in Armyspeak. He's been to Iraq for two deployments, half of his four years in the Army.

Five personal friends have been buried.

"It's hard to deal with sometimes," Riley said. "To have this kind of lifestyle gives you a different perspective on Memorial Day."

Even here, though, respect for afternoon retreat had slipped. When Hammond returned to Fort Hood in January, it hacked him off.

"We'd lost the edge here at Fort Hood on respecting a very private tradition in our Army," he said. "Originally I was told, 'We can't do this. As large as Fort Hood is, if we shut it down every day for this purpose, it's going to create a tremendous backlog of traffic. It's not going to work. We've tried it before.' ...

"I'm a hard-ass. I decided we're going to do it. The vote is over. The debate's out. This is more important."

Hammond has reveled in the response. E-mails flooded his computer, from retirees, families, soldiers. Thank you, they said, for reminding us.

The whole nation, he said, could use an afternoon retreat.

"Memorial Day is a time when we stop -- everything else is shut out -- to reflect, to give thanks and to not forget,"

he said. "God help us at the moment of time when we forget."

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